

# OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES

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BY

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## OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES.\*

BY WM. OSLER, M. D.

Very fitting indeed is it that he who had lived to be "the last leaf upon the tree" should have fallen peacefully in the autumn which he loved so well. Delightful, too, to think that although he had, to use the expression of Benjamin Franklin, intruded himself these many years into the company of posterity, the freshness and pliancy of his mind had not for a moment failed. Like his own wonderful "one-hoss shay," the end was a sudden breakdown; and though he would have confessed, no doubt, to "a general flavor of decay" there was nothing local, and his friends had been spared that most distressing of all human spectacles, those cold gradations of decay, in which a man takes nearly as long to die as he does to grow up, and lives a sort of death in life, "*ita sine vita vivere, ita sine morte mori.*"

Enough has been said, and doubtless well said, by those who make criticism their vocation, upon the literary position and affinities of Oliver Wendell Holmes, and I shall spare your perhaps already surcharged ears. He has been sandwiched in my affections these many years between Oliver Goldsmith and Charles Lamb. More than once he has been called, I think, the American Goldsmith. Certainly the great distinction of both men lies in that robust humanity which has a smile for the foibles and a tear for the sorrows of their fellow-creatures. The English Oliver, with a better schooling for a poet (had he not learned in suffering what he taught in song?), had a finer fancy and at his best a clearer note. With both writers one is at a loss to know which to love the better, the prose or the poetry. Can we name two other prose-writers of equal merit, who have so successfully courted the "draggled-tailed Muses," as Goldsmith calls them? Like Charles Lamb, Holmes gains the affections of his readers at the first sitting,

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\*Remarks made at the Johns Hopkins Medical Society, October 15, 1894.



and the genial humor, the refined wit, the pathos, the tender sensitiveness to the lights and shadows of life, give to the Breakfast Table Series much of the charm of the Essays of Elia.

While it is true that since Rabelais and Linacre no generation has lacked a physician to stand unabashed in the temple at Delos, a worshipper of worth and merit amid the votaries of Apollo, I can recall no name in the past three centuries eminent in literature—eminent, I mean, in the sense in which we regard Goldsmith—which is associated in any enduring way with work done in the science and art of medicine. Many physicians, active practitioners—Sir Thomas Browne, for example—have been and are known for the richness and variety of their literary work; but, as a rule, those who have remained in professional life have courted the “draggled Muses” as a gentle pastime, “to interpose a little ease” amid the worries of practice. Few such have risen above mediocrity; fewer still have reached it. We know the names of Garth, of Arbuthnot and of Akenside, but we neither know them nor their works. The list is a long one, for the rites of Apollo have always had a keen attraction for the men of our ranks, but the names fill at the best a place in the story of the literature of the country, not a place in the hearts and lives of the people. Far otherwise is it with a select group of men, Goldsmith, Crabbe and Keats, at the outset members of our profession, but who early broke away from its drudgery. In pride we claim them, though in reality no influence of their special studies is to be found in their writings. Two of these, at least, reached the pure empyrean, and to use Shelley’s words, robed in dazzling immortality, sit on thrones

“built beyond mortal thought,  
Far in the Unapparent.”

Oliver Wendell Holmes may not reach the same exalted sphere, but he will always occupy a unique position in the affections of medical men. Not a practitioner, yet he retained for the greater part of his active life the most intimate connection with the profession, and as Professor of Anatomy at Harvard University, kept in touch with it for nearly forty years. The festivals at Epidauros were never neglected by

him, and as the most successful combination which the world has ever seen of the physician and the man of letters, he has for years sat amid the Esculapians in the seat of honor.

During the nineteenth century three schools in succession have moulded the thoughts and opinions of the medical profession in this country. In the early period English ways and methods prevailed, and (as in the colonial days) the students who crossed the Atlantic for further study went to Edinburgh or to London. Then came a time between 1825 and 1860 when American students went chiefly to Paris, and the profession of the country was strongly swayed by the teaching of the French school. Since 1860 the influence of German medicine has been all-powerful, but of late American students are beginning to learn that their "wanderjahren" should be truly such, and that when possible they should round out their studies in France and England.

In the thirties a very remarkable body of young Americans studied in Paris, chiefly under the great Louis—Oliver Wendell Holmes, James Jackson, Jr., Henry I. Bowditch and George C. Shattuck, from Boston, Swett, from New York, Gerhard and Stillé, from Philadelphia, and Power, from Baltimore. They brought back to this country scientific methods of work and habits of accurate, systematic observation, and they had caught also, what was much more valuable, some of his inspiring enthusiasm. So far as I know, one alone of Louis's American pupils remains, full of years and honors—Prof. Stillé, of the University of Pennsylvania.

More than once in his writings Holmes refers to his delightful student days in France, and the valedictory lecture to his class in 1882 is largely made up of reminiscences of his old Paris teachers.

The fulness of Holmes's professional equipment is very evident in his first contributions to medicine. In the years 1836 and 1837 we find him successfully competing for the Boylston prizes, with essays on Intermittent Fever in New England, on Neuralgia, and on the Utility and Improvement of Direct Exploration in Medical Practice. Of these the essay on intermittent fever is in many ways the most important, since it contains a very thorough review of the testimony of the early New England writers on the subject, for which



purpose he made a careful and thorough examination of the records of the first century of the settlements. Here and there throughout the essay there is evidence of his irrepressible humor. Referring to the old writers, he says, that because indexes are sometimes imperfect, he has looked over all the works page by page, with the exception of some few ecclesiastical papers, sermons and similar treatises of Cotton Mather, "which, being more likely to cause a fever than to mention one, I left to some future investigator." The essay shows great industry, and is of value to-day in showing the localities in which malaria prevailed in the early part of this century, and at the time at which he wrote. The essay on neuralgia is not so interesting, but is an exhaustive summary of the knowledge of the disease in the year 1836. The third dissertation, on direct exploration, of much greater merit, is a plea for the more extended use of auscultation and percussion in exact diagnosis. The slowness with which these two great advances were adopted by our fathers contrasts in a striking manner with the readiness with which at the present day we take up with new improvements and appliances. Avenbrugger's work on percussion dates from 1761, but it was not until the beginning of this century that the art of percussion was revived by Corvisart and Laennec; while Piorry, as Holmes says, succeeded in creating himself a European reputation by a slight but useful modification in the art, referring to his pleximeter, of which in another place he says that Piorry "makes a graven image." The great discoveries of Laennec make their way very slowly to general adoption, and to this Holmes refers when he says, "it is perfectly natural that they (speaking of the older practitioners) should look with suspicion upon this introduction of medical machinery among the old, hard-working operatives; that they should for a while smile at its pretensions, and when its use began to creep in among them, that they should observe and signalize all the errors and defects which happened in its practical application."

Gerhard's work on the diagnosis of diseases of the chest was published in 1836, and with this essay of Holmes's opened to the American profession the rich experience of the French school in the methods of direct exploration in all disorders of the

chest and of the heart. Holmes's essay may be read to-day by the student with great profit; it is particularly rich in original references to the older writers. Readers of the *Autocrat* and of others of Holmes's literary works have been surprised at the readiness with which he quotes and refers to the fathers of the profession, a facility readily explained by these Boylston prize dissertations; and in their preparation he had evidently studied not only the modern authors of the day, but he had gone in the original to the great masters from Hippocrates to Harvey.

The prize essay does not constitute the most enduring form of medical literature, and though the dissertation on Malaria is in some respects one of the very best of the long series of Boylston essays, yet we could scarcely have spoken of a medical reputation for Dr. Holmes had it to rest upon these earlier productions. A few years later, however, he contributed an article which will long keep his memory green in our ranks.

Child-bed fever was unhappily no new disorder when Oliver Wendell Holmes studied, nor had there been wanting men who had proclaimed forcibly its specific character and its highly contagious nature. Indeed, so far back as 1795, Gordon, of Aberdeen, not only called it a specific contagion, but said he could predict with unerring accuracy the very doctors and nurses in whose practice the cases would develop. Rigby, too, had lent the weight of his authority in favor of the contagiousness, but the question was so far from settled that, as you will hear, many of the leading teachers scouted the idea that doctors and nurses could convey the disorder. Semmelweis had not then begun to make his interesting and conclusive observations, for which his memory has recently been so greatly honored.

In 1842, before the Boston Society for Medical Improvement, Dr. Holmes read a paper entitled "The Contagiousness of Puerperal Fever," in which he brought forward a long array of facts in support of the view that the disease was contagious, conveyed usually by the doctor or the nurse, and due to a specific infection. At the time there certainly was not an article in which the subject was presented in so logical and so convincing manner. As Sidney Smith says, it is not the man who first says a thing, but it is he who says it so long, so



loudly and so clearly that he compels men to hear him—it is to him that the credit belongs; and so far as this country is concerned, the credit of insisting upon the great practical truth of the contagiousness of puerperal fever belongs to Dr. Holmes. The essay is characterized in places by intenseness and great strength of feeling. He says he could not for a moment consent to make a *question* of the momentous fact which should not be considered a subject for trivial discussion, but which should be acted upon with silent promptitude. “No negative facts, no passing opinions, be they what they may or whose they may, can form any answer to the series of cases now within the reach of all who choose to explore the records of medical science.” Just before the conclusions the following eloquent paragraphs are found, portions of which are often quoted:—“It is as a lesson rather than as a reproach that I call up the memory of these irreparable errors and wrongs. No tongue can tell the heart-breaking calamities they have caused; they have closed the eyes just opened upon a new world of life and happiness; they have bowed the strength of manhood into the dust; they have cast the helplessness of infancy into the stranger’s arms, or bequeathed it with less cruelty the death of its dying parent. There is no tone deep enough for record, and no voice loud enough for warning. The woman about to become a mother, or with her new-born infant upon her bosom, should be the object of trembling care and sympathy wherever she bears her tender burden, or stretches her aching limbs. The very outcast of the street has pity upon her sister in degradation when the seal of promised maternity is impressed upon her. The remorseless vengeance of the law brought down upon its victims by a machinery as sure as destiny, is arrested in its fall at a word which reveals her transient claims for mercy. The solemn prayer of the liturgy singles out her sorrows from the multiplied trials of life, to plead for her in the hour of peril. God forbid that any member of the profession to which she trusts her life, doubly precious at that eventful period, should regard it negligently, unadvisedly, or selfishly.”

The results of his studies are summed up in a series of eight conclusions, and the strong ground which he took may be gathered from this sentence in the last one: “The time has



come when the existence of a private pestilence in the sphere of a single physician should be looked upon not as a misfortune but a crime." Fortunately this essay, which was published in the ephemeral New England Quarterly Journal of Medicine, was not destined to remain unnoticed. The statements were too bold and the whole tone too resolute not to arouse the antagonism of those whose teachings had been for years diametrically opposed to the contagiousness of puerperal fever. Philadelphia was the centre of the teaching and work in obstetrics in this country, and if we can speak at all of an American school of obstetricians it is due to the energy of the professors of this branch in that city, and for the sake of the memory of the men we could wish expunged the incident to which I will now allude.

In 1852 the elder Hodge, Professor of Obstetrics at the University of Pennsylvania, published an essay on the non-contagious character of puerperal fever, and in 1854 Charles D. Meigs, Professor of Obstetrics at the Jefferson Medical College, published a work on the nature, signs, and treatment of child-bed fevers, in a series of letters addressed to students of his class. Both of these men, the most distinguished professors of obstetrics in America, took extreme ground against Holmes, and Meigs handled him rather roughly.

Nothing daunted, in the following year (1855) Holmes reprinted the essay, calling it *Puerperal Fever as a Private Pestilence*. He clearly appreciated the character of the work he was doing, since in the introduction he says, "I do not know that I shall ever again have so good an opportunity of being useful as was granted to me by the raising of the question which produced this essay." The point at issue is squarely put in a few paragraphs on one of the first pages; the affirmative in a quotation from his essay: "The disease known as puerperal fever is so far contagious as to be carried from patient to patient by physicians and nurses" (1843). The negative in two quotations, one from Hodge (1852), who "begged his students to divest their minds of the dread that they could ever carry the horrible virus"; and of Meigs (1854), who says, "I prefer to attribute them (namely, the deaths) to accident or Providence, of which I can form a conception, rather than to a contagion of which I cannot form any clear idea."

The introduction to the essay, which was reprinted as it appeared in 1842, is one of the ablest and most trenchant pieces of writing with which I am acquainted. There are several striking paragraphs; thus, in alluding to the strong and personal language used by Meigs, Holmes says: "I take no offence and attempt no retort; no man makes a quarrel with me over the counterpane that covers a mother with her newborn infant at her breast." He appeals to the medical student not to be deceived by the statements of the two distinguished professors which seem to him to encourage professional homicide. One paragraph has become<sup>\*</sup> classical: "They naturally have faith in their instructors, turning to them for truth, and taking what they may choose to give them; babies in knowledge, not yet able to tell the breast from the bottle, pumping away for the milk of truth at all that offers, were it nothing better than a professor's shriveled forefinger."

The high estimate in which this work of Holmes' is held has frequently been referred to by writers on obstetrics.

Some years ago in an editorial note I commented upon a question which Dr. Holmes had asked in his "Hundred Days in Europe." Somewhere at dinner he had sat next to a successful gynæcologist who had saved some hundreds of lives by his operations, and he asked, "Which would give the most satisfaction to a thoroughly humane and unselfish being, of cultivated intelligence and lively sensibilities: to have written all the plays which Shakespeare has left as an inheritance for mankind, or to have snatched from the jaws of death more than a hundred fellow-creatures, and restored them to sound and comfortable existence?" I remarked that there was nobody who could answer this question so satisfactorily as the Autocrat, and asked from which he derived the greater satisfaction, the *essay on puerperal fever*, which had probably saved many more lives than any individual gynæcologist, or the *Chambered Nautilus*, which had given pleasure to so many thousands. The journal reached Dr. Holmes, and I read you his reply to me, under date of January 21st, 1889:

"I have rarely been more pleased than by your allusion to an old paper of mine. There was a time certainly in which I would have said that the best page of my record was that in which I had fought my battle for the poor poisoned women.



I am reminded of that essay from time to time, but it was published in a periodical which died after one year's life, and therefore escaped the wider notice it would have found if printed in the *American Journal of the Medical Sciences*. A lecturer at one of the great London hospitals referred to it the other day and coupled it with some fine phrases about myself which made me blush, either with modesty or vanity, I forget which.

“I think I will not answer the question you put me. I think oftenest of the ‘Chambered Nautilus,’ which is a favorite poem of mine, though I wrote it myself. The essay only comes up at long intervals. The poem repeats itself in my memory, and is very often spoken of by my correspondents in terms of more than ordinary praise. I had a savage pleasure, I confess, in handling those two professors—learned men both of them, skillful experts, but babies, as it seemed to me, in their capacity of reasoning and arguing. But in writing the poem I was filled with a better feeling—the highest state of mental exaltation and the most crystalline clairvoyance, as it seemed to me, that had ever been granted to me—I mean that lucid vision of one's thought and all forms of expression which will be at once precise and musical, which is the poet's special gift, however large or small in amount or value. There is more selfish pleasure to be had out of the poem—perhaps a nobler satisfaction from the life-saving labor.”

Last year at the dinner of the American Gynæcological Society in Philadelphia a letter from Dr. Holmes was read referring to the subject in very much the same language as he uses in his letter to me. One or two of the paragraphs I may quote. “Still I was attacked in my stronghold by the two leading professors of obstetrics in this country.

“I defended my position, with new facts and arguments, and not without rhetorical fervor, at which, after cooling down for half a century, I might smile if I did not remember how intensely and with what good reason my feelings were kindled into the heated atmosphere of superlatives.

“I have been long out of the way of discussing this class of subjects. I do not know what others have done since my efforts; I do know that others had cried out with all their



might against the terrible evil, before I did, and I gave them full credit for it.

“ But I think I shrieked my warning louder and longer than any of them, and I am pleased to remember that I took my ground on the existing evidence before the little army of microbes was marched up to support my position.”

Fortunately, Dr. Holmes's medical essays are reprinted with his works. Several of them are enduring contributions to the questions with which they deal ; all should be read carefully by every student of medicine. The essay on Homeopathy remains one of the most complete exposures of that therapeutic fad. There is no healthier or more stimulating writer to students and to young medical men. With an entire absence of nonsense, with rare humor and unfailing kindness, and with that delicacy of feeling characteristic of a member of the Brahmin class, he has permanently enriched the literature of the race.

Search the ranks of authors since Elia, whom in so many ways Holmes resembled, and to no one else could the beautiful tribute of Landor be transferred with the same sense of propriety :

“ He leaves behind him, freed from grief and fears,  
Far nobler things than tears,  
The love of friends without a single foe,  
Unequalled lot below.”











